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ABSTRACT

The argument is presented that men do not avoid careers in early childhood education simply because they lack commitment to or care little for young children; rather, they avoid such work because economic conditions in early childhood education are poor and the potential of men to contribute to the field is not well understood by educators. Subtopics addressed include the potential for male involvement in the education of young children, the rationale for including men in the profession, the qualities of male teachers of young children, additional reasons for low levels of male involvement, and the future prospects for men in early childhood education. (RH)

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Third Draft

MEN IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Traditionally, men have constituted only a small part of all early childhood educators. In 1984, for example, somewhere between one and three million persons defined themselves as direct child care providers or early childhood educators of some type (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1985); but only about 5% of these were male. Early childhood education as a profession therefore includes somewhere between 50,000 and 150,000 male practitioners, give or take several thousand (U. S. Census, 1985). This makes men in this field about as common, for example, as doctors in family practice.

Yet men have an importance to this field beyond their small numbers. Their very absence has limited what early childhood educators can know about male practitioners directly: we must often rely on impressions of men in other situations or jobs. Their absence may also have affected salaries and working conditions--probably for the worse. Even professional attitudes may have been defined too narrowly as a result of the one-gender history of early childhood education. But of this, more later.

These comments imply several reasons why men in early childhood education may be scarce. The rest of this chapter will make these more explicit. In brief, it will argue that men do not avoid early childhood education because they lack commitment or care for young children. On the contrary, their behavior in another role--as fathers--suggests a large reservoir of positive personal interest in children. Rather, men

are scarce because economic conditions in Early Childhood Education are poor, and because early childhood educators themselves do not fully understand what males can and cannot contribute to this field by virtue of their gender. Explicit discrimination against males in Early Childhood Education is rare, or at least more rare than among female minorities who enter male-dominated occupations.

Potential for Male Involvement with Young Children

Compared to their scarcity in Early Childhood Education, males seem relatively involved with young children as parents; though they still spend less time with children than do women. The difference between male and female parents is not as large as often believed, and in any case it does not seem to reflect differences in the feelings that men have for children.

Differences in Time. Fathers spend an average of 15 to 25 minutes per day in focused interaction with their children, and an average of 2 to 3 1/2 hours in activities that involve children only partially or intermittently (Hoffman, 1984; Pleck, 1983a). These amounts all tend to be higher with fathers of preschoolers, and decrease as the children get older. They have not changed over the last two or three decades.

The amounts may be lower than some people prefer, but they are not as low as popular stereotypes sometimes imply. In the past 30 years, in fact, fathers have increased their proportionate contribution to child care significantly, partly because wives--including even those who do not work--have decreased the absolute amount of time they spend on child

care and house work during this same period. Not surprisingly, wives who do work have decreased the time they give to child care and house work even more. In the late 1970's, as a result, fathers in two-career families were doing about 1/3 of the total child care, broadly defined (Pleck, 1983a). In one-career families, they did only about 1/6 of the total child care work. The figures vary a bit among studies, and according to whether they were collected by diaries, interviews, or observations. But in general they are roughly consistent.

Differences in Commitment. Given that fathers spend less time with children, do they also feel less psychological involvement with their children and families? Here, too, research contradicts common stereotypes: it consistently suggests that both sexes care more about their families than about their work, and that the sexes do not differ much in this regard. For example, both sexes report thinking about their children while at work, much more often than they think about work while at home. And both sexes report using free time largely with their families (Pleck and Lang, 1978; Veroff, et al., 1981). Both sexes also report more general satisfaction with their families than from work (Campbell, et al., 1976). On all of these counts, the sexes do not differ significantly.

These findings do not contradict the fact that fathers spend less time with children than do mothers, nor deny that child care may mean different things to men than to women. The findings do suggest, however, that as individuals men may care about children more than commonly believed. Developing professional commitments to children can presumably

therefore build on this base of positive personal feeling; it need not create it in the first place. If early childhood educators have not built such commitment among very many men, then they may have failed for other reasons some of which are discussed below.

From Personal Contributions To Professional Commitments

In early childhood education, male involvement with children has not kept pace with even the moderate levels found among fathers. The 100,000 practicing male teachers, of course, dedicate considerable effort to children; but male parents number in the millions, rather than in the thousands. Looked at another way, male parents provide about 1/6th to 1/3d of all home child care; but male teachers only provide about 1/10th of all early education. Evidently parenting involves men with young children far more than does early childhood teaching.

From time to time, early childhood educators have advocated larger male involvement as professional teachers and child care workers (Robinson, 1982). They have justified their support both for the sake of the children and for the sake of early childhood education as a profession. Ironically, some of these reasons are mutually contradictory, and this fact may explain why advocacy for male teachers has not led to dramatic changes in their numbers during the past two or three decades.

Compensation Hypotheses. Reasons focusing on the needs of the children might be called the compensation hypotheses. These ideas all suggest that male teachers can somehow compensate for the lack of men in young children's lives. In the most common version of this viewpoint,

male teachers help young children's sex-role development. The help can occur in either of two ways: 1) by building boys' self-confidence and "sex appropriate" behavior (Biller, 1974; Pleck, 1983b), or 2) by offering children of both sexes a model of a caring, nurturant male (Seifert, 1975). Unfortunately, however, the two goals stem from conflicting values. The first implicitly favors traditional differences in gender roles, and the second implicitly opposes them. This conflict has either gone unnoticed by policy makers in early childhood education; or proved impossible to resolve; or a bit of both.

One problem with compensation hypotheses is that they expect particular embodiments of values from all male teachers, and that they assume particular needs within all young children. For their own good, young children are supposed to observe particular qualities in male teachers, whether the "old" manly ones or the "new" androgynous ones. In reality, however, children bring a variety of needs to school; and all teachers, male or female, are challenged to take these variations into account. In any one child care center or class, not all children (or their parents) want androgyny, nor do they all want the same particular division of sex roles.

Social Equity Hypotheses. Reasons focusing on the needs of early childhood education as a profession might be called social equity hypotheses (Greenberg, 1985). Having more male teachers, according to this view, not only increases career options for men, but also helps society to distinguish early childhood education from "women's work." This view takes no explicit position about the qualities of male teachers in the

classroom or as professionals, nor about special male effects on children. Strictly speaking, therefore, it does not really contradict the compensation hypotheses.

In a democratic society, of course, social equity has a lot to recommend it. The most obvious beneficiaries would be men themselves: a visible male presence in early childhood education would probably stimulate still more men to consider this field more seriously as a career. In the long run, therefore, men would acquire a new career option, one which had previously been off limits psychologically and culturally. This change would be fair or equitable, provided that women in the meanwhile acquired new career options of their own. Otherwise, it could simply aggravate women's current disadvantages in the working world.

Less obvious, but still beneficiaries, would be the early childhood profession at large. According to social equity arguments, increasing the number of males working with young children would reduce the current tendency of early childhood educators to think of their job as "women's work," with all of the professional disadvantages connected with that image (Feiman-Nemser and Floden, 1986). Instead early childhood education teachers would more consistently think of their jobs as "professionals' work"; and so, hopefully, would the public as well. Already, of course, many leaders in Early Childhood Education think of themselves as professionals. But having larger numbers of men should strengthen this self-image, and give the field more professional self-confidence.

Current stereotypes expect many things from early childhood teachers which are also expected of stereotypical mothers: passive compliance with the authorities, for one example, and lack of interest in personal and professional development, for another. These expectations are often not justified; but they can spoil teachers' pride in their work, and make them wish they had chosen some other profession (Biklen, 1983; Feistritzer, 1983). In these ways, separating the notions of teaching and of womanhood might encourage professionalism in early childhood education.

But there are problems with social equity hypotheses, too. In society as a whole, beliefs in social equity must compete strongly with other cultural values, including beliefs in traditional gender roles in particular. Therefore, not everyone can be expected to welcome larger numbers of males into early childhood education. It seems likely, for example, that some members of society (and even some existing female teachers) may feel that an influx of male teachers threatens female jobs. These reactions would resemble those that occur when women make their first appearance in previously all-male jobs (Schreiber, 1979).

Even if these fears do not constitute reasons for keeping men out of early childhood education, they deserve consideration. What, in fact, would be the effects of larger numbers of men entering early childhood education? The answer to this question is necessarily speculative; but research on existing male teachers does suggest some preliminary ideas about it.

Qualities of Male Teachers of Young Children

So far, research on male teachers of young children has focused on three issues: their personal and professional backgrounds, their styles of classroom teaching, and their long-term attitudes about early childhood education as a career. According to current findings, men differ substantially from women only in the last of these three areas.

Personal and Professional Backgrounds. In spite of the usefulness of such information, little is known about the personal backgrounds of early childhood teachers, whether male or female. At present, the best guesses about their backgrounds must extend or extrapolate from surveys of related groups, such as elementary school teachers. The latter group, by all reports, come from relatively modest economic backgrounds; include more than their share of persons with low academic ability; and yet account for one of the largest proportions of university degrees of any profession (Feistritzer, 1983). As it happens, all of the above features occur more strongly among male elementary teachers than among female ones (NEA, 1982). On the average, that is, men who teach elementary school come from more modest economic backgrounds than do women; include more low-ability persons as students-in-training; and yet account for more university degrees than do women.

Whether these sex differences also occur among early childhood teachers, however, is not certain. The small number of men in this field, in particular, poses a problem in drawing parallels with elementary teachers. As an extremely select group, the males stand more chance of differing somehow from other male teachers, and of differing from

female early childhood teachers as well. As a group, male early childhood teachers have contradicted many more gender expectations than usual. This fact suggests a need to learn what these individuals have experienced that allowed them to do so: did they persevere well, for example, or were they just oblivious to social prejudices? Male early childhood teachers, it seems, are unique enough to deserve their own demographic survey; they are numerous enough to lend themselves to it; and yet invisible enough not to have been surveyed yet.

Classroom Teaching Style. Under current circumstances, men who teach young children do not adopt teaching styles much different from those of women who teach young children (Lee and Wolinsky, 1973). Both sexes initiate activities at about the same frequencies; both offer similar arrays of choices to children (art, stories, snack, and the like); both respond to disruptive behavior in similar ways. Existing gender differences stem more from differences in amounts of classroom experience that teachers have. The less experienced gender (males) behaves much like less experienced teachers in general: for example, men rely comparatively more on children's initiatives for selecting activities, and engage in more rough-and-tumble play (Gold and Reis, 1978).

Because of a scarcity of highly experienced males, however, we do not know whether experienced male teachers would necessarily resemble experienced female teachers. Although it is tempting to think so, gender differences in personal and professional backgrounds might alter their long-run teaching styles: eventually, that is, males might begin to diverge from females in this field. Studies of the socialization of other

teachers supports this hypothesis (Hoy and Rees, 1977; Sprinthall and Thies-Sprinthall, 1983). In elementary schools, in particular, beginners tend to be impressed by the work of veteran teachers, and imitate their conduct as closely as possible. On the whole, elementary teachers do not report feeling in control of their own teaching style until many years into their classroom careers--longer than most males currently have worked in early childhood education.

Note, too, that even if teaching behaviors look similar, they may not be perceived as similar if performed by members of the opposite sex. This possibility seems especially likely in situations such as early childhood classrooms, that are strongly associated with just one gender. A female teacher's noncomittal response to a child's anger, for example, may look like gentle patience to the uninitiated observer; but a similarly ambiguous response by a male teacher may look like an effort to restrain the teacher's own anger. Research about impression formation suggests that such reinterpretations occur widely: particular attitudes, behaviors, and personal qualities take on very different meanings, depending on the sex of the person who shows them (Deaux, 1984). If males adopt the normal, usual styles of early childhood teaching, therefore, at least some of their behavior may not seem "normal" or "usual" to some parents and children.

Long-run Orientations To Teaching. The lack of classroom style differences suggests that if gender differences exist among early childhood teachers, they have to do with long-run orientations to teaching. Research confirms this possibility for elementary school teachers: at

this level of schooling, women remain in the classroom for more years than do men, either through choice or through lack of alternatives (Sadker and Sadker, 1985). Men, for their part, seek administrative work sooner and more frequently than females. According to conventional wisdom, furthermore, men also become more frustrated than women with classroom work as the years go by. Some research has supported this idea (Lortie, 1975), but other research finds that both sexes become equally frustrated (Spencer, 1986).

During the first five to ten years of early childhood teaching, however, men and women show rather similar attitudes about their work. Detailed interviews of male teachers of young children finds some hints of frustrated ambition among them--but only hints (Seifert, 1984). Even after several years, both sexes appear to enjoy the classroom; express a desire to remain working in it; and also express a desire to leave it "eventually." When the men in Seifert's study did express interest in non-classroom work, their alternatives usually concerned other services to children: instead of teaching a kindergarten class, for example, a man would aspire to work in a city recreation program. Contrary to popular expectations, relatively few males aspired to become school administrators. These results essentially parallel those found among females teachers (see Biklen, 1983); but they are more surprising to discover in males.

Why Do Men Remain A Minority?

In spite of their greater involvement with children as parents, why have men remained such a small proportion of early childhood educators? Two reasons have already been suggested in this chapter. The first is the way that male teachers are justified to society: sometimes the reasons conflict, and therefore cause little net increase in support among parents and policy makers. The second reason has to do with the structure of early childhood teaching: this job seems to require more fixed units of commitment to children than does parenting. This fact may not be fair to women in society generally, who often also experience "fixed units of commitment" as mothers. But it may affect males as teachers more strongly than women as mothers, since men can probably find alteratives to early childhood teaching more easily than women can find alternatives to motherhood.

In addition, however, at least three other reasons exist for low male involvement. First, the very poor salaries and working conditions in early childhood education probably encourages men, more than women, to look elsewhere for employment. This happens partly because men are socialized to evaluate jobs more exclusively by their long-term career opportunities, and partly because society offers men more alternative forms of employment, most of which pay substantially more than working with young children. On the whole, women have fewer occupations to choose from, and most of these are poorly paid. That many women nonetheless enjoy working with young children intensely probably shows the in-

trinsic viability of Early Childhood Education as a profession, as much as female "indifference" to low pay.

Second, the gender biases which pervade society at large seem to affect early childhood educators as well. One survey found, for example, that pre-service education students rate typical male education students as significantly less suitable for early childhood education, compared to their female peers (Seifert, 1983). Similar biases exist among experienced teachers as well. A recent study of educators in Oklahoma, for example, found that teachers of both sexes--but especially men--associated the teaching role with a variety of female virtues, such as "intuitive sensitivity" and lack of ambition (Patrick, et al., 1986). The teachers did not, however, associate these virtues nearly so strongly with women's role in general. In evaluating women's role, in fact, teachers approximated the relatively liberal attitudes of other professionals in Oklahoma; but in evaluating teachers' role, they were significantly more gender-typed or traditional.

Third, the widely reported isolation of classroom teaching may help to maintain constant proportions of the genders among teachers, whatever that mix happens to be currently. Isolation achieves this result by its contradictory effects on individual teachers. On the one hand, isolation may make some teachers--male or female--feel unwanted and unrespected. Individual teachers probably will attribute these feelings to a variety of causes: to being inexperienced, for example, or to being female (for women) or being a minority (for men). On the other hand, the isolation of the classroom may also protect dedicated male

teachers from the worst expressions of discrimination or disrespect. This protection may not help to recruit men into early childhood teaching in the first place. But it may help some men feel better--less hassled--about their choice once they are in. All things considered, the net result will be the status quo: protection for some males, but demoralization for others, whether male or female. If male teachers therefore happen to form a minority, then isolation will tend to keep them a minority.

Note that explicit discrimination probably does not affect male involvement in early childhood education strongly. Interviews with experienced male kindergarten teachers suggest that discrimination does occur, but also suggest that such discrimination is only occasional (Seifert, 1984). Among the twenty men interviewed, for example, about half described incidents which they considered discriminatory. Principals refused to allow them to teach the youngest children in a particular school, for example, and male teachers encountered conflicts with their own mothers and fathers when they first entered early childhood teaching. But none of the men in Seifert's study considered such experiences major obstacles to their professional development; and half never mentioned any such incidents at all. If discriminatory incidents interfere with male involvement, therefore, they probably do so primarily among would-be male teachers, by making men expect that they will experience difficulties once they actually begin work.

The Future for Men in Early Childhood Education?

This chapter has proposed that men have much more involvement with young children as parents than as teachers. This fact suggests that there is potential for greater male involvement as early childhood teachers than in the past. Men, it seems, may not be avoiding early childhood education primarily because they dislike children, but for other reasons, such as poor pay and historical inertia. From these ideas follows the most crucial argument: that recruiting more men would enhance the professional self-image of early childhood education. But it would not necessarily compensate for any gender role deficits or needs in the children we serve; arguing that it would, in fact, may actually be beside the point.

Research supports these ideas, at least for the immediately future. If additional males in early childhood education resemble those who currently work in this field, then recruiting more men will not change the background characteristics of the early childhood education teaching force very much. Nor will more men affect daily, typical classroom practices. More men will, however, bring stronger long-run commitments to sustained work, and they will help to distinguish the nurturing, caring, and teaching roles of early childhood education from its current stereotype as "women's work."

Over the longer term, though, recruiting more men may have other effects, which by their nature are currently hard to anticipate. Very large numbers of men, for example, would probably lead to new sorts of individuals--both male and female--entering early childhood education.

At present, though, the personalities and backgrounds of these people can only be guessed at. Presumably they would continue to have the strong dedication to children's learning and development which current early childhood educators so often show. But they might also enter early childhood education with a strong expectation of joining a true profession: one that no longer operates in near poverty level conditions, and in which colleagues are both able and willing to share ideas and time with each other.

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